

December 12, 2001

VHA CORRESPONDENCE MANAGEMENT

1. PURPOSE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive provides policy on the management of high priority correspondence within VHA.

2. BACKGROUND: The quality of correspondence prepared in VHA reflects directly on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the services VA provides.

a. As a result, it is expected that correspondence will be handled promptly and will provide the requested information in a courteous, compassionate manner that mirrors a customer-service orientation.

b. Attachment A provides correspondence policy for VHA.

c. Attachment B provides an explanation of terms.

d. Attachment C provides Correspondence Priority Rules (CPR).

3. POLICY: It is VHA policy that all correspondence for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health will be expedited in a timely and appropriate manner.

4. ACTION

a. **VHA Chief Officers.** VHA Chief Officers are responsible for ensuring that effective correspondence programs are in place within their functional areas, including:

(1) Designating a correspondence liaison who is responsible for the management of correspondence;

(2) Providing the Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) with a final draft reply that is responsive to the incoming correspondence, as well as timely, factually correct, and consistent with VHA and departmental policy;

(3) Concurring on high priority correspondence within 2 days;

(4) Updating the Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) to show the current status of all correspondence assigned in their program area; and

(5) For correspondence assigned for signature at the Chief Officer level, applying the same principles of quality and timeliness as required for correspondence signed by the Secretary or Under Secretary for Health. When (101B) assigns correspondence to a program office for signature by the Chief Officer (or equivalent), the program office bears full responsibility for preparing a complete and timely response, obtaining all needed concurrences, and signing and

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dispatching the signed response by the assigned due date. The program office will forward a copy of the signed response to (101B) in EDMS for information and tracking.

b. **Office of Executive Correspondence.** The Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) is responsible for:

- (1) Timely and accurate correspondence administration from assignment to completion;
- (2) Reviewing and editing final drafts submitted by program offices, obtaining required concurrences, and preparing a final signature-ready letter for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health;
- (3) Providing guidance on correspondence issues as circumstances warrant;
- (4) Serving as the primary point of contact with other VA elements on correspondence management issues; and
- (5) Developing workload reports that accurately reflect performance in correspondence reporting.

5. REFERENCES: None.

6. FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITY: The Director, Office of Executive Correspondence (101B), is responsible for the contents of this Directive.

7. RESCISSION: VHA Directive 96-050 is rescinded. This VHA Directive expires December 31, 2006.

S/ Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D.
Under Secretary for Health

Attachments

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ATTACHMENT A

VHA CORRESPONDENCE PROCESSING

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) correspondence processing emphasizes accountability, cooperation, and progress toward attainment of the goal of zero overdue correspondence.

1. **(101B)** is responsible for correspondence administration, including the efficiency of VHA correspondence processing.
2. **Program Office.** The Program Office has knowledge of concerns raised in incoming correspondence and takes the lead in developing a response. The program office is responsible for providing (101B) with a final draft that fully responds to incoming correspondence in a timely and effective manner.
3. **Concurring Office.** The concurring office(s) has specific expertise on a portion of what is contained in a draft response. It is responsible for concurring, or providing comments, on a draft letter in a timely manner.
4. **High Priority Correspondence.** Congressional correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health followed by other correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health.
5. **Process.** This process is intended for correspondence that will be prepared for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and Under Secretary for Health.
 - a. An incoming letter is received in (101B), either from the Executive Secretariat (001B) or from other sources, and is entered into EDMS and assigned to the appropriate program office(s) to prepare a draft response. Program offices are given up to 6 workdays to prepare a final draft. When there are multiple, discrete issues presented requiring distinct responses from various program offices, (101B) will take the lead in making simultaneous assignments and coordinating the response. Due dates have been established based on the type of correspondence (see Att. C).
 - b. Program Offices must review assignments immediately to determine if an interim response is needed. If an interim is needed, it should be prepared within one day of the assignment. If there is uncertainty about whether an interim is necessary, an interim should be prepared immediately to prevent an assignment from becoming overdue.
 - c. A final draft response that addresses each of the issues raised in the incoming letter is developed within the stated timeframe by the program office, along with a concurrence and summary sheet, when required. This response is the official VHA position and must be fully coordinated. The response, concurrence and summary sheet, and all pertinent background information is entered into EDMS by the program office and sent through appropriate internal channels before an assignment is made to (101B). The final VHA draft response should represent current VHA policy or position on the issues or concerns. Informal external and

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internal VHA consultation are important steps in preparing the final draft that is assigned to (101B).

d. (101B) will format and edit the letter (and the fact sheet and concurrence and summary sheet, if required), and will assign it to concurring offices to obtain the necessary concurrences. If (101B) feels that a draft response has not fully addressed all of the issues in the incoming letter, (101B) staff will contact the correspondence liaison, or alternate, for clarification or additional information. The correspondence liaison must ensure that (101B) has all of the information necessary to fully address all issues. Both (101B) and program office staff should resolve a question or concern with a phone call or other informal means of communication when practical. A final draft should rarely be returned to the program office for rewrite.

e. Following the initial assignment, program offices will be given 2 days to concur on correspondence assigned to them by (101B). After entering a concurrence in the EDMS folder, an assignment will be made back to (101B). If a concurrence, or communication regarding the concurrence, is not received after 2 days, concurrence will be assumed. Folders are not held by (101B) for overdue concurrences. Concurring offices need to resolve content issues with the responsible program office. (101B) will refer substantial (content) questions or concerns to the correspondence liaison in the originating program office for resolution. Issues will be addressed and responded to within 2 days.

f. (101B) finalizes the letter and assembles a folder for presentation at VHA mail call. Upon signature or approval, (101B) will dispatch the letter if it is for the signature of the Under Secretary for Health, or will forward it to (001B) if it is for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. If questions are raised at mail call, (101B) may consult with the correspondence liaison.

ATTACHMENT B

EXPLANATION OF TERMS

1. High Priority Correspondence. High Priority Correspondence is:

a. Congressional correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health.

b. Other correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary for Health.

2. Timeliness and Quality. Program offices are given up to 6 work days to prepare a final draft and submit it to the Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) for high priority correspondence. All issues are to be fully addressed. The necessary coordination and resolution of controversial issues should be reconciled prior to the draft being sent to (101B).

3. Electronic Document Management System (EDMS). EDMS is the tracking system which must be used by program offices and by which they keep up to date with the current status of each folder.

4. Concurrences. Upon receipt of a final draft, (101B) will determine the concurrences that are needed and will make assignments to program offices for concurrences. Program offices have 2 days to concur on high priority correspondence. If a concurrence, or communication regarding the concurrence, is not received within this time, concurrence will be assumed and the response will be finalized for signature.

5. Correspondence Assignments. Correspondence is assigned to a program office based on the predominant issue in the incoming letter. However, if a program office receives correspondence which clearly should be answered more appropriately by another office, reassignment may be requested by contacting (101B) in person or by email. This reassignment needs to be done within one day. (101B) determines the assignee who must assume responsibility for handling the correspondence. When there are multiple, discrete issues presented requiring distinct responses from various program offices, (101B) will take the lead in making simultaneous assignments and coordinating the response.

6. Correspondence Liaison. Officials must be designated by each Chief Officer to manage correspondence in the program office and to work closely with the Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) on issues relating to correspondence management, review, and control. Liaisons are to be designated in each program office.

7. Dispatching Signed Correspondence. Correspondence for the signature or concurrence of the Under Secretary for Health or the Deputy Under Secretary for Health will be dated and dispatched by the Office of Executive Correspondence (101B). Correspondence assigned for other signature levels within VHA typically will be signed and dispatched by the responsible action office and a file copy provided to (101B). Correspondence for the Secretary's signature is dispatched by (001B).

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8. Interims. Program offices will review assignments immediately to determine if an interim response is needed. Interims are needed when it is obvious that a reply cannot be prepared within the assigned timeframe. If an interim is needed, it should be prepared within 1 day of the assignment. If there is uncertainty about whether an interim is necessary, an interim should be written to prevent an assignment from becoming overdue.

ATTACHMENT C

CORRESPONDENCE PRIORITY RULES (CPR)

RULES FOR ASSIGNING DUE DATES TO INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has established the following protocol for establishing response due dates depending on the nature of the incoming correspondence, unless otherwise specified:

RESPONSE DUE

TYPE OF INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE

7 Calendar days from receipt

- a. White House special referral; and
- b. Personal letter from key Congressional members involving mismanagement, malpractice, prohibited personnel action (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Whistleblowing), safety violations, or other serious allegation

14 Calendar days from receipt

- a. Intergovernmental, e.g., Office of Management and Budget (OMB), General Accounting Office (GAO), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Office of Personnel Management (OPM), etc.;
- b. Veterans Service Organization(s) (VSOs); and
- c. Personal letter from key Congressional members involving issues not identified in the preceding.

30 Calendar days from receipt

- a. White House bulk mail;
- b. Case mail from Congressional members; and
- c. All other routine correspondence.

NOTE: Contact 101B for additional information (202) 273-6280.